DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 666 CS 011 401

AUTHOR Fry, Edward
TITLE Students Do Read Better Today?
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *Reading Ability; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Research; *Reading Tests; Standardized Tests; Test Norms
IDENTIFIERS California; National Assessment of Educational Progress

ABSTRACT

Despite widely-held beliefs to the contrary, three different sources of research data prove that children in the 1990s read better on the average than either their father's generation or their grandfather's generation. "Then and Now" studies indicate that students read better now than decades ago. Restandardization of test norms also indicate an improvement of reading ability. In the only large study planned to show change over time, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) measured the reading ability of 9 year olds, 13 year olds, and 17 year olds every few years between 1971 and 1990. Considering the vast demographic shifts, NAEP's finding that there was no significant change in reading ability between 1971 and 1990 is a testimonial to the ability of United States reading teachers. Reading teachers should read reports of NAEP studies with extreme caution. On first appearance it looks like U.S. students are doing poorly, but on careful reading, all that is happening is that some unknown "they" have set "proficiency standards" that "they" would like all students to meet. Comparative data in the NAEP study indicates that school children in California, which adopted a new framework for language arts instruction in 1987, scored near the bottom on the assessment. Readers of news media reports of NAEP reports should use all their critical reading skills: they should not confuse hard core comparative data with somebody's expectations which might be called "standards" or "proficiency levels." (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Students Do Read Better Today ?

ED 361 666

I would like to call the attention of all reading teachers to excellent article "What Reading Teachers Should Know About Reading Proficiency In The U.S." by Michael Kibby in the September issue of the Journal of Reading.

In the popular press and over coffee with friends, we continually hear that children's reading ability just isn't as good as it used to be in some supposed good old days. Kibby's article proves that this just plain isn't true. As proof that children today read better on the average than either their fathers generation or their grandfathers generation he gives us three different but important sources of research data.

1. Then and Now studies in which a large group of children are tested with the same test as was used many years before. For example, 38,000 Iowa students were tested in 1940 and 25 years later in 1965 another 38,000 Iowa students were tested with the same test. The later students scored 8.5 months higher in reading.

2. In test restandardization, new norms are developed for an older test. The 1976 Gates MacGinitie test was administered in 1987. All grade levels from 1 through 9 showed an increase at all ability levels (10th, 50th and 90th percentiles). But grades 10-12 showed a very slight decline. The Spache Diagnostic Reading Scales renormed in 1981 showed a gain at every year from the 1963 norms using the same oral paragraphs.

3. In the only large study really planned to to show change over time, the NAPE (National Assessment of Educational Progress) measured the reading ability of 9 year olds, 13 year olds, and 17 year olds every few years between 1971 and 1990.

AS011401

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Edward Fry

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Basically there is no significant change in reading ability between 1971 and 1990 for the U.S. school population as a whole. Considering the vast demographics shifts, this is a real testimonial to the ability of U.S. reading teachers. I say this because NAPE and every other large scale study of reading ability shows a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and reading ability. Between 1971 and 1990 in the whole state of California, Anglos have become a minority of the school population and the socioeconomic level of children in virtually every large city school system has fallen considerably. That Americas teachers have been able to cope with this and still not see a overall fall of scores is tremendous.

This good news does not mean that there is still not a lot of work to do. We as a profession are profoundly disturbed that Black and Hispanic children still score below Anglo children. We need to work harder and research harder, but a little help improving the socioeconomic conditions of the home and better education of the parents wouldn't hurt.

If it is true that reading scores, in general are not falling, why then does the news media and much of the general public have that impression? It might be partly that bad news is better copy than good news. A glass that is half full is also half empty and if you just look a little harder you can find some bad spots. Like the undereducated newspaper reporter who who shocked to find that half the population of readers was below average. Not half? Yes, half are below average - what else do you think an average is? That poor reporter would really have a heart attack if he ever found out that 1 out of 10 children were in the bottom 10%. Or worse yet he would put in the newspaper with a banner headline: "Local schools failing on one out of 10 children".

We also have the "old oaken bucket" phenomena which goes something like this: "When I was a boy, the grass was greener, kids had more fun, the girls were prettier, and

everybody read better". Well at least music was different, but facts are the kids did not read any better.

Perhaps we better let Prof. Kibby, author of the article and who directs the Reading Clinic at the University of Buffalo have the last word:

> "all available data debunk the myth that there has been a decline in the reading abilities of Grades 1-8 students in the U.S. in the last 150 years"
>
> "Unqualified statements proclaiming that today's high school students are less literate than in the past are totally erroneous, and are being made on some basis other than data and facts".

\- - -

Reading teachers should read current reports on NAPE studies with extreme caution. On first appearance it looks like U.S. students are doing poorly but on careful reading all that is happening is that some unknown "they" have set "proficiency standards" that "they" would like all students to meet.

For example the bad news as expressed in Education Week of September 22, 1993:

"More than two-thirds of the nations 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students - including one quarter of high school seniors- are not proficient readers, according to the latest results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress..... 'the results of this study are extremely troubling', said Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley"

Only the careful reader would remember that later on the same article states:

> "the report contains no information on whether students reading achievement has improved or worsened".

But this cautionary note certainly wasn't in the headline or even

the first half dozen paragraphs.

So I say that it is fine that some individual or august group blows smoke at the ceiling and state "students should read better". They might even make this simple statement, to which we all can agree, sound more profound by stating that there are some "proficiency levels" that are needed by todays children or todays factory workers. Remember a "standard" or a "proficiency level" is only a point on a continuum or spread of ability scores. People who set standards frequently forget that any ability score, including reading ability scores, follow a normal distribution curve. If everybody passes it is so low as to be meaningless and if few pass they may have set the standard too high for reality. For example, it shouldn't surprise anybody but a newspaper reporter or a Secretary of Education that "one quarter of high school seniors are not "proficient" readers". Any "standard" or any "proficiency level" is merely a point on the curve or normal spread of abilities.

Everybody wants to read better. I wish I could read the Physicians Desk Reference with more than 50% comprehension and I often wish I could follow directions better when reading my computer manual. I know that it would be great if all the workers in a America could read technical manuals better or that citizens could read political statements more critically. But let us not confuse hopes or "proficiency levels" with research data.

The recent NAEP study did not give us a comparison with previous years students but it did give us some comparisons between states that we might well ponder. For example the Education Week article points out :

> "One surprise in the study was the low performance of school children in California. That state in 1987 adopted a new framework for language arts instruction that called for a significant shift from traditional approaches. And 87 percent of California

teachers, when asked by NAEP, said they had heavily emphasized the new approaches.

Yet the average reading proficiency scores of California's 4th graders were near the bottom on the assessment. Only District t of Columbia, Guam, Hawaii, Louisiana, and Mississippi had lower average scores.

.....

White students in California also performed near the bottom when compared with white students in other states.

'It wasn't just a matter of immigrants bringing down the higher scores' Mr. Musick (of ETS) said"

So when you read a headline in Education Week or your local paper like the one they used "STUDENT'S READING SKILLS FALL SHORT, NAEP DATA FIND", you better use all your own critical reading skills. Do not confuse hard core comparative data with somebodies expectations which might be called "standards" or "proficiency levels". Comparative data show us that U.S. students reading skills have in general improved for the past 150 years and that is the good news. The bad news is that minority groups, and now California students in "literature based" approaches might not be doing so well.

Edward Fry
Professor Emeritus
Rutgers University

currently at
245 Grandview
Laguna Beach, CA 92651